

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 AF-10 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
H-01 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02
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P R 241653Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 832
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY DAKAR
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY RABAT
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PGOV, TS
SUBJECT: A TALK WITH AHMED MESTIRI

REFS: A. TUNIS 2839 (NOTAL), B. TUNIS 2732 (NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY: SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC LEADER AHMED MESTIRI SPENT AN HOUR WITH ME DISCUSSING HIS RECENT TRAVELS ABROAD AND PARTICULARLY HIS US LECTURE TOUR. HE IS STUNNED BY THE PETTINESS OF THE GOT IN BRINGING A COURT CASE AGAINST HIM FOR UTTERANCES IN LONDON AND FOR HAVING THE PRIME MINISTER DENOUNCE HIM AND HIS COLLEAGUES AT LENGTH BEFORE THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. HE REFUSES TO BE INTIMIDATED AND WILL CONTINUE HIS CAMPAIGN FOR A UNIFYING "NATIONAL PACT". END SUMMARY.

2. ON APRIL 20 AHMED MESTIRI, LEADER OF SOCIAL-DEMOCRATIC GROUP, CAME BY FOR A TALK WITH ME CONCERNING HIS RECENT TRAVELS ABROAD (INCLUDING U.S.), THE CHARGES PENDING AGAINST HIM HERE AND HIS FUTURE PLANS.

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3. HE GREATLY ENJOYED HIS FIRST REAL EXPOSURE TO THE U.S. AND AMERICANS IN EAST, WEST AND MEDWEST. PARTICULARLY IMPRESSIVE WERE THE GREAT UNIVERSITIES HE HAD VISITED AND THE HEALTHY, FRIENDLY CONGENIAL ATMOSPHERE OF CAMPUSES. HE MET PEOPLE OF ALL ECONOMIC STRATA AND OF WIDELY DIFFERING POLITICAL VIEWS ALL OF WHOM SEEMED

WARM, OPEN, HELPFUL AND INQUISITIVE. HE IS IMPATIENT TO GO BACK.

4. AS A MAN OF THE LAW, HE FELT OBLIGED TO RETURN IN ANSWER TO A SUMMONS TO APPEAR BEFORE A JUGE D'INSTRUCTION APRIL 17 (REFTEL). HE WAS RELIEVED THAT GOT HAD NOT ARRESTED HIM AT THE AIRPORT AS RUMORS HAD IT AND GREATLY HEARTENED BY THE DISPLAY OF MORAL SUPPORT FROM FELLOW MEMBERS OF THE BAR, 83 OF WHOM SIGNED A STATEMENT OFFERING THEIR SERVICES AS COUNSEL AND ABOUT SIXTY OF WHOM LEFT STANDING ROOM ONLY IN THE COURTROOM. HE CHALLENGED THE LEGALITY OF THE GOT'S ALLEGATIONS (SPREADING FALSE REPORTS AND DEFAMATION OF THE STATE). IF HE COMMITTED A CRIME, HE SAID, BY STATEMENTS TO THE PRESS IN LONDON, THE TUNISIAN COURTS HAVE NO JURISDICTION, PARTICULARLY SINCE THE OFFENSE WAS NOT A CRIME IN THE COUNTRY WHERE IT WAS ALLEGED TO HAVE BEEN COMMITTED AND SINCE THE OPINIONS HE EXPRESSED WERE NOT REPRINTED IN TUNISIA. HE FEELS HIS POSITION IS LEGALLY SOUND AND HE THINKS THE GOT WOULD BE FOOLISH TO INDICT HIM. IF INDICTED, HOWEVER, HE WILL FIGHT THE CHARGE TO THE END.

5. AT THIS POINT, MESTIRI SAID, HE IS MERELY APPALLED BY THE "PETTINESS" OF THE GOVERNMENT WHICH HAS UNDOUBTEDLY BROUGHT THE CASE IN A CLUMSY EFFORT TO INTIMIDATE HIM. I TOLD HIM THAT I THOUGHT THE GOT MIGHT ALSO BE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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MOTIVATED BY A DESIRE TO KEEP HIM INDEFINITELY AT THE DISPOSITION OF THE COURT AND THUS PREVENT HIM FROM LEAVING THE COUNTRY. HE SAID THAT THE SAME THOUGHT HAD OCCURRED TO HIM, PARTICULARLY SINCE THE GOT IS UNDOUBTEDLY AWARE THAT HE HAS AN APPOINTMENT IN THE FIRST WEEK OF MAY (MAY 3, AS WE HAVE SINCE LEARNED) TO MEET IN DAKAR WITH PRESIDENT LEOPOLD SENGHOR.

6. I TOLD MESTIRI THAT RUMORS WERE ALSO CIRCULATING CONCERNING HIS PLANS TO VISIT LIBYA. HE REPLIED THAT HE CERTAINLY DOES HOPE TO VISIT LIBYA. BUT HE BELIEVES THAT THIS IS NOT THE RIGHT TIME AND HE HAS MADE NO FIXED PLAN TO DO SO.

7. WE THEN DISCUSSED THE ADDRESS BY PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ON APRIL 8 (TUNIS 2732

NOTAL) IN WHICH THE SOCIAL-DEMOCRATS WERE SO ROUNDLY DENOUNCED. MESTIRI CONSIDERED THAT IT WAS SILLY OF NOUIRA TO DEVOTE SO MUCH OF HIS TIME TO ATTACKING HIS GROUP "AS IF WE WERE THE CHIEF ENEMIES OF THE REGIME". NOUIRA SHOULD REMEMBER, HE EMPHASIZED, THAT "WE WERE

NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SINS OF BEN SALAH, FOR THE STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS, FOR TAHAR BELKHODJA'S MACHINATIONS, FOR THE WILDCAT STRIKES IN LATE 1977 NOR, LEAST OF ALL, FOR THE EVENTS OF JANUARY 26, 1978".

8. I MENTIONED THAT IN THE SAME SPEECH NOUIRA HAD REITERATED AN EARLIER CHALLENGE TO THE PSD'S OPPOSITION TO TEST THEIR POPULARITY BEFORE THE ELECTORATE IN 1979 AND ASKED WHETHER HE BELIEVED THE REGIME WOULD TOLERATE SUCH OPPOSITION. MESTIRI SAID HE THINKS THE QUESTION IS ACADEMIC AND PREMATURE AT THIS POINT, SINCE SO MANY THINGS COULD HAPPEN BETWEEN NOW AND NOVEMBER 1979. IDEALLY, HE THINKS, THE GOT SHOULD ACT SOON IN REALIZATION OF THE URGENCY OF THE NEED FOR NATIONAL UNITY AND LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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AVOID THE NEED FOR CREATION OF OPPOSITION PARTIES. HIS "NATIONAL PACT", HE INSISTED, PROVIDES THE ANSWER AND HE WILL CONTINUE TO PUBLICIZE HIS IDEAS AND ORGANIZE SUPPORT FOR THEM.

9. COMMENT: MESTIRI SEEMED MUCH MORE BUOYANT AND SELF-CONFIDENT THAN AT OUR LAST MEETING. HE GIVES NO EVIDENCE AT ALL OF BEING INTIMIDATED IF SUCH HAS BEEN THE GOT'S INTENTION. WE AGREED TO CONTINUE OUR PERSONAL CONTACTS OVER THE PERIOD AHEAD.
MULCAHY

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